



Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor

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Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor

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One of the last narrative views of the Great Aztec Temple before it was partially dismantled by cannon fire by the Spaniards comes from Díaz del Castillo, sergeant in Cortés's army who has given us a hair-raising account of human sacrifice at the ceremonial capital. During the ferocious Spanish siege of the capital of Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs made a desperate sacrifice of Spanish soldiers to their sun and war god Huitzilopochtli, whose shrine sat on top of the Templo Mayor located in the heart of the city.

When we retreated near to our quarters and had already crossed a great opening where there was much water, the arrows, javelins and stones could no longer reach us. Sandoval, Francisco de Lugo and Andreas de Tapia were standing with Pedro de Alvarado each one relating what had happened to him and what Cortes had ordered, when again there was sounded the dismal drum of Huichilobos and many other shells and horns and things like trumpets and the sound of them all was terrifying, and we all looked towards the lofty Pyramid where they were being sounded, and saw that our comrades whom they had captured when they defeated Cortés were being carried by force up the steps and they were taking them to be sacrificed. When they got them up to a small square in front of the oratory, where their accursed idols are kept, we saw them place plumes on the heads of many of them and with things like fans in their hands they forced them to dance before Huichilobos and after they had danced they immediately placed them on their backs on some rather narrow stones which had been prepared as places for sacrifice, and with some knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols that were

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there, and they kicked the bodies down the steps, and the Indian butchers who were waiting below cut off their arms and feet and flayed the skin off the faces, and prepared it afterwards like glove leather with the beards on, and kept those for the festivals when they celebrated drunken orgies and the flesh they ate in chilmore.¹

This shocking description of Aztec ritual killing presents one of the dominant popular images we have of Aztec religion as a tradition of high pyramids, dismal drums, bloodthirsty priests, and eerie settings with cannibalism added for flavor. A more careful look at this description, in terms of familiarity with the Aztec mythic tradition, reveals important clues to the Aztec sense of "orientation" in their cosmos.² This text alone shows that the Aztecs seek a vital sense of power at their Great Temple. They act against the growing disequilibrium in their world through aggressive ritual action at their sacred center. They attempt to revitalize themselves at a time of deep crisis by climbing their temple with captive warriors, and, after ceremonial dancing and singing, killing them on an "altar" and throwing their bodies down the steps. Then they dismember and flay their victims, followed by ritual cannibalism. Aztec history and myth tells us that the practice of temple and mountain ascent to revitalize the world through ritual killing was a time-honored tradition.³ A closer look at Díaz del Castillo's description will reveal that this apparently "barbaric" action and place had mythic significance expressive of the commitment of the Mesoamerican urban tradition to cosmic rejuvenation through ritual killing.

At the outset of this chapter on Aztec strategies for orientation and control, it is important to say that this horrific image is often juxtaposed with the opposite view of Aztec religion and character. Scholars such as Miguel León-Portilla, George Kubler, Burr Brundage, and Esther Pasztory, as well as Richard Townsend,⁴ have explored with remarkable insight the philosophical, architectural, and artistic accomplishments of the Aztecs and their neighbors. The fractured image that results from a total view of Aztec life raises questions of the most profound and emotional sort. For instance, how could a people who conceived of and carved the uniquely marvelous calendar stone and developed one of the most accurate calendrical systems of the ancient world⁵ spend so much time, energy, and wealth in efforts to obtain and sacrifice human victims for every conceivable feast day in the calendar? Why did a people so fascinated by and accomplished in sculpture, featherwork, craft industries, poetry, and painting⁶ become so committed to cosmic regeneration through the thrust of the ceremonial knife? The Aztec image that glares at us through the texts is an image of startling juxtapositions of Flowers, Song/Blood, Cut.

In spite of this frenzied paradox, the "place" of the Great Temple and its ritual traditions remains central and vital in any serious interpretation of the Aztec world. This is especially true when we realize that the Templo Mayor was not only the sacred center of an urban polity but was also the architectural and symbolic end product in a long process of Mesoamerican urbanism. It is particularly important to highlight

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the urban character of this place and its ceremonial traditions, following the groundbreaking work of Pedro Armillas, Gordon Willey, Paul Kirchhoff, and Pedro Carrasco,⁷ who have illuminated the outlines of complex city-state societies that controlled Mesoamerican history for two millennia. The social and symbolic world of the Aztecs and their temple tradition consisted of a collection of small local states called *tlatocayotls*. These city-states consisted of small, agriculturally based, politically organized territories under the control of a city that was the seat of government, ceremonial action, and the home of the ruling class, which claimed descent from the gods. Conflict, warfare, and human sacrifice at major temples dominated the social order of the Aztec world. The Templo Mayor and the city of Tenochtitlan were the paramount expressions of this pattern of organization through control of over 400 towns in thirty-eight provinces that constituted the Aztec empire. The paradigmatic influence of Tenochtitlan is reflected in Edward Calnek's judgment that "Prior to the conquest, it had been the largest and most highly urbanized of all Mesoamerican cities"⁸ and the insight of Paul Wheatley that the traditional city, in general, was "the style center of the traditional world,"⁹ which set the pattern of social, economic, ritual, and political life. The clues to the Aztec method of dominating this social and symbolic pattern which are reflected in this text provide the point of departure for this contribution to the multidisciplinary exercise on the significance of the Templo Mayor in Mesoamerican religion and society.

HISTORY OF RELIGIONS AND MESOAMERICA

We may come to a greater understanding of the Aztec sense of orientation and control in their world by focusing on the Aztec mythic vision of place, that is, the way they conceived the origin and character of their cosmos and society and their pressured role within it. As a number of studies have shown, by knowing a culture's mythic structure¹⁰ and vision of its own place and position in the cosmos, we come to know the central paradigms of orientation and control in that culture. Jonathan Z. Smith explains the importance of knowing a people's vision of place this way: "The question of the character of the place upon which one stands is the fundamental symbolic and social question. Once an individual or culture has expressed its vision of its place, a whole language of symbols and social structure will follow."¹¹

Smith's statement and work become an excellent point of departure into the Aztec case when we join it to the insights revealed in the wider studies by Mircea Eliade and Paul Wheatley on sacred places, ceremonial centers, and ritual repetition. It is especially in Eliade's work on the history of sacred centers that we see more clearly how a language of symbols and social structure will follow from such a vision.¹²

In such works as *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, *Myth and Reality*, and *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, and especially in his essay "Cosmogonic Myth and Sacred History,"¹³ Eliade shows that myths of origin constitute a "primordial sacred

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history," which, brought together by the totality of significant myths, "is fundamental because it explains and, by the same token, justifies the existence of the world, of man, and of society. This is the reason that a mythology is considered at once a true history, it relates how things came into being, providing the exemplary model and also the justification of man's activities." What seems clear in a number of cross-cultural and particular studies in ancient and modern cultures is that this "primordial sacred history" contained in the myths provides the cosmological setting, the sacred context for action, and the exemplary models for the ritual activities that constitute the ceremonial, political, and social world of ancient people. The word "primordial" is especially important here because it refers to an original, authoritative, unquestioned structure of reality. Whether we utilize the terminology of Cornelious Loew, "cosmological conviction";¹⁴ Rene Berthelot, "astro-biological thought";¹⁵ or Jonathan Z. Smith, "utopian cosmology,"¹⁶ traditional Aztec myths have at least four authoritative characteristics relevant to Mesoamerican cosmology, history, and vision of place. These myths (and especially the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth and the myth of the creation of the fifth sun) (1) enjoy a primordial, authoritative prestige throughout the empire; (2) provide exemplary models for the proper relationship between humans and the cosmos; (3) contain dramatic strategies for rejuvenation of the world at all levels; and (4) appear as influential forces even in opaque fragments and forms that do not seem to have explicit connections to myths but that carry implicit mythic significance. According to Eliade, the major ordering principle for this pattern of archetype and repetition is the Cosmogonic Myth, the Great Story of universal creation, which is the exemplary model for all subsequent creations that result in the order and renewal of all elements of the world. The cosmogonic myth is the story of the birth of the cosmos through heroic and exuberant deeds by supernatural beings. It provides the setting and the pattern for creative action and proper conduct in all levels of reality, both terrestrial and celestial.

My strategy in this chapter will be to penetrate the Aztec vision of place exemplified in the Templo Mayor through drawing the lines of coincidence between Aztec mythology, as understood in the light of Eliade and Wheatley's work, and the two dimensions of orientation at Templo Mayor reflected in the opening quotation—ceremonial space and ritual death. Specifically, I will approach this coincidence through direct interpretation of two major mythic episodes in the Aztec tradition, the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth at the mountain of Coatepec and the cosmogonic myth of the creation of the Fifth Age at the sacred city of Teotihuacan. I will relate these mythic traditions to the evidence associated with the excavation of Templo Mayor, to illustrate how the Aztec vision of place was directed not only toward founding and maintaining a magnificently ordered cosmos held firmly at the capital through miniaturization of religious archetypes but also directed, through the expansion of these archetypes, toward controlling peripheral communities by integrating them forcefully within the Aztec world.

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I must note the tentative nature of the essay presented in this chapter because the Templo Mayor was not only a paradigm of the Mesoamerican world, but continues to be, for modern scholars, at least two other things—a puzzle and a scandal. It is a puzzle because it contained so many bits, pieces, parts, and shapes of the Aztec world arranged according to a plan that we have still only vaguely discerned. There are an enormous number of questions raised by the groups of masks, rebuildings, child sacrifices, strange deity images, Toltec symbolism, pervasiveness of Tlaloc imagery, and absence of Huitzilopochtli. It will take decades to figure out the full design of this puzzle. The scandal of the Templo Mayor resides in its pre-Columbian use as a theater for large numbers of human sacrifices of warriors, children, and slaves. Although we have been aware of this shocking practice for almost half a millennium, the scholarly community has been remarkably hesitant to explore the evidence and nature of large-scale ritual killing in Aztec Mexico. Something repulsive, threatening, and apparently mind-boggling about the increment in human sacrifices has confounded theologians, anthropologists, and other scholars in their consideration of Aztec ritual.¹⁷ The exemplary, puzzling, and scandalous nature of this temple and the excavation demand an approach similar to the one articulated by Peter Brown in his essay on imaginative curiosity:

We must ask ourselves whether the imaginative models that we bring to the study of history are sufficiently precise and differentiated, whether they embrace enough of what we sense to be what it is to be human, to enable us to understand and to communicate to others the sheer challenge of the past.¹⁸

In my view, the imaginative models of the history of religions do provide a useful approach to the “sheer challenge of the Aztec past” and its great temple.

CITY AND SYMBOL

Only in the last thirty years have scholars begun to focus intensely on the urban character of the ancient Mexican world. During this time relatively little attention has been given to the relationship between cosmological archetypes and the great capital cities that directed and dominated Mesoamerican cultural life for nearly 2,000 years. One of the most significant developments in this regard has been the work of an urban ecologist Paul Wheatley, who has developed a general model of how traditional cities were organized as symbols of cosmic order. In three important works of scholarship, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City*, “City as Symbol,” and “The Suspended Pelt: Reflections on a Discarded Model of Spatial Order,”¹⁹ Wheatley has shown that in the seven areas of primary urban generation (China, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, Peru, southwestern Nigeria, the Indus Valley, and Egypt), that is, where cities were first created, a special kind of symbolic consciousness was utilized to organize space and human action. The great capitals of the earliest urban societies were laid out as

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symbols of cosmic order and destiny. Drawing directly from the insights of Mircea Eliade and others in his studies of the mythic influences in archaic civilization, Wheatley has illuminated the manner in which the royal and sacerdotal elites who ruled these capitals developed complex processes of control over the ecological complexes of ancient society. Two sentences from Wheatley's chapter "The Ancient Chinese City as a Cosmo-Magical Symbol" illustrate the religious character of this control:

Underpinning urban form not only in traditional China but also throughout most of the rest of Asia, and with somewhat modified aspect in the New World, was a complex of ideas to which Rene Berthelot has given the name astro-biology. . . . This mode of thought presupposes an intimate parallelism between the mathematically expressible regimes of the heavens, and the biologically determined rhythms of life on earth, (as manifested conjointly in the succession of the seasons and the annual cycles of plant regeneration).²⁰

Wheatley calls this attitude "cosmo-magical thought," thought that dwells on the imitation of complex and detailed archetypes, and he has shown how it was expressed in at least three aspects of spatial organization that contributed to the prestige of capitals as the sacred pivots of the universe.

More specifically, the ancient ideal type city was a sacred space oriented around a quintessentially sacred center in the form of a temple or temple pyramid. This pivot of the community partook of the "symbolism of the center," meaning that it was believed to be the center of the world, the point of intersection of all the world's paths, both terrestrial and celestial. The central structure was an axis mundi, "regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell," or "the point of ontological transition between the spheres." The priestly elites who planned and directed the construction of their ceremonial centers often attempted to align their causeways, sections of city, or major buildings with the cardinal compass directions of the universe, "thus assimilating the groups' territory to the cosmic order and constructing a sanctified living space or within the continuum of profane space." These four highways, sections, or structures enforcing the sanctification of the central place were centripetal and centrifugal guides, pulling the sacred and social energies into the center and diffusing the supernatural and royal powers outward into the kingdom. Another aspect of urban sacred space was manifest when a ceremonial center, or one or more of its major buildings, represented through the image, design, and interrelationship of parts a cosmological concept or mythological episode. In this instance, a correspondence between stone image and celestial action was achieved in the appearance of a ceremonial building.

Recently a brilliant analysis of Aztec art, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan* by Richard Fraser Townsend, demonstrates the Aztec version of this parallelism in a fresh way. Focusing on the "imperial monumental ensemble" of Tenochtitlan, Townsend reveals how ritual attire, sculpture, commemorative monuments, and Nahuatl metaphors expressed a "living structural affinity between the

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natural and social orders" of the universe. Townsend's study shows how various examples of art, architecture, and numerous ceremonial objects were dramatic ways by which the "Aztec state validated itself by expressing its indissoluble connection with the sacred universe." It is evident in Townsend's elegant rendering of Aztec art the degree to which a commitment to a parallelism between heavens and earth was embedded in Aztec religion. As we shall now see, the Aztec capital and its ceremonial center, especially the myths and architecture of the Templo Mayor, exemplified this pattern of cosmomagical organization in a distinct manner.²¹

THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

The Aztec vision of their city and empire was largely derived from their cosmology, which contained a number of spatial and temporal archetypes, that is, exemplary models of a "transcendental" or celestial origin that appears in the myths, sacred histories, sculpture, and picture books. The Aztecs, like many Mesoamerican communities, conceived of their world as a land surrounded by water, Cemanahuac.²² At the center or navel, tlaxico, stood their capital city, Tenochtitlan. Through this center flowed the vertical cosmos, which consisted of a series of thirteen layers above and nine layers below the earth. Each celestial layer was inhabited by a deity, a sacred bird, and a specific cosmological influence and color.²³ The nine underworld layers were hazard stations for the souls of the dead, who, through the aid of magical charms buried with the bodies, went on a quest for eternal peace at the lowest level, called *Mictlan*.

The special location of the Aztec capital in this vertical cosmos is referred to in an Aztec poem:

Proud of itself
Is the City of Mexico-Tenochtitlan
Here no one fears to die in war
This is our glory

This is Your Command
Oh Giver of Life
have this in mind, oh princes
Who could conquer Tenochtitlan
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?²⁴

The city was eulogized as a proud, fearless, and glorious place, an invincible center that linked the world of fearless warriors with the universal god, the "Giver of Life."²⁵ Conceived of as the "foundation of heaven," Tenochtitlan was the point of union between the celestial powers and the underworld. It joined the many parts of the cosmos together. In Aztec thought it had to be unshakable, for if it was disturbed and conquered, the cosmos would collapse.

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in the Aztec foundation myth, a version of which is embroidered on the flag of modern Mexico. According to their sacred history, the Aztecs emerged from *Chicomoztoc* (the "Seven Caves"), which was on an island surrounded by a lagoon. Their patron deity Huitzilopochtli appeared in a dream to their shaman priest, commanding him to lead the people south to a place where the god would appear in the form of a great eagle perched on a blooming nopal growing from a rocky island in the middle of a lake. The Aztecs traveled south and beheld the omen, realizing that this was to be the place of their future city, which according to the divine promise would become "the queen and lady of all the others of the earth, and where we will receive all other kings and lords and to which they will come as to one supreme among all the others."²⁶ The Aztecs rejoiced at the sight of their new land and enthusiastically built the first shrine to the patron god Huitzilopochtli—a shrine made of reeds and wood.²⁷ This original shrine became the Templo Mayor.

Another version of the foundation story reveals the fuller character of Tenochtitlan as the center of vertical space. Following the sighting of the eagle, one of the Chichimec priests dived into the lake and disappeared. Believing that he had drowned, his companions returned to their camp. Soon he returned to report that beneath the lake he talked with Tlaloc, the old god of the earth, and had received permission for the Aztecs to settle there. The city's existence was thereby sanctified by both the forces of the earth and the sky.

From these stories we can see that Tenochtitlán was conceived not merely as the new settlement but also as the royal city of the world to which the various royal authorities would visit "as one supreme among all the others." This special prestige is reflected in the frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza*, which is an image of the foundation myth. It pictures the eagle, nopal, stone, and lake image above a large Aztec shield with seven eagle down feathers and seven arrows attached to it. This is the ideogram for "Place of Authority," and the painted image can be read, "The Aztecs have arrived in Tenochtitlan, the place of authority."²⁸ The persistence of Tenochtitlan's status as the center for royal authority in central Mesoamerica is demonstrated by the fact that when Cortés wrote his second letter in 1520 to the emperor of Spain, he reported that "all the Lords of the Land, who are vassals of the said Moctezuma have houses in the city and reside therein for a certain time of year."

During the next 200 years of Tenochtitlan's existence, an elaborate ceremonial center was constructed around the original shrine. This sacred precinct increased in size about 440 meters on each of its four sides. It is an example of miniaturization and expansion woven together. While the entire ceremonial center constituted an enlargement of the original hierophany at that location, the entire space was organized as a smaller image of the entire universal order. It contained numerous structures, including schools for the nobility (*calmecac*), a series of large and small temples, a giant skull rack, a ball court, and administrative structures, all surrounded by a three-meter-high wall called the *coatepantli*, or serpent wall. Into this ceremonial center poured pilgrim, king, noble, merchant, warrior, sacrificial victim, architect, ally, and enemy.

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It was here that the spectacular human sacrifices took place, often at night before glowing torches and throngs of participants and onlookers. The Aztec world was integrated here. One of the most obvious examples of the integration of religious forces within the capital was the special temple built by Moctezuma II for the purpose of housing the images of deities from towns and cities throughout the Aztec empire. All supernatural powers were imprisoned into the center of the empire in order to integrate the divine forces of the realm.

HUITZILOPOCHTLI AND THE TEMPLO MAYOR

Earlier in this chapter I pointed out the value of identifying a people's vision of place, in particular the mythic dimensions of that vision. We learn a great deal about the Aztec mythic vision from the *teocuicatl*, or divine song about Huitzilopochtli's birth,²⁹ for this story was the sacred history about the Great Temple, the god, and ritual sacrifice. At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of this song, we see that the place of Huitzilopochtli's birth, called Coatepec (Serpent Mountain), is the center of the Aztec vision of place. A closer look at the story and its relation to the evidence from the excavation shows the temple of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli was an *imago mundi*, an image of the Aztec world.

In order to gain an interpretive perspective on these complexities, I intend to read the myth in five parts that reveal the dramatic progression of an amazing conflict, the intertwining of Aztec myth, the concept of sacred space, and the justification of massive human sacrifice: (1) the cosmological setting of the story; (2) the miraculous pregnancy of Coatlicue, the Mother Goddess; (3) the ferocious preparation for war by the 400 children at the periphery of the Aztec world; (4) Huitzilopochtli's birth and massive killing of his siblings; and (5) the historical epilogue. In this manner, the reader can gain a sense of order and religious meaning in the myth.

The Cosmological Setting

"The Aztecs greatly revered Huitzilopochtli, they knew his origin, his beginning, was in this manner . . ." the narrative begins.

It is important to note the cosmological setting for the action in the myth because it establishes in part the nature of Huitzilopochtli's religious significance. We are immediately told that the Aztecs had great reverence for the god and remembered "his origin, his beginning" in detailed form. The combination of reverence and creation reflects the cosmogonic prestige of the story. This is not just a story about the god—it is the story of his creation. As the narrative continues, we hear of two major places of religious significance in the Aztec landscape—Coatepec, or Serpent Mountain, and Tula,³⁰ which was the capital of the Toltec empire. The action to come, we are told, takes place near Tula on the great mountain. This location of the action repeats a pat-

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tern in many Mesoamerican sacred histories in which the movement from action in the heavens to action on earth passes through, or in relation to, the paradigmatic kingdom of Quetzalcoatl, whose seat of power and authority was in Tollan, also called *Tula*. The proximity to the Toltec tradition is a *sine qua non* of Aztec authority, as my previous work on Quetzalcoatl demonstrated. In terms of the history of religions, this combination of Coatepec, Tula, and the prestige of origins reflects what has been called a "mythical geography," a geography that is fundamentally important because of its mythic prestige and symbolic capacity to sanctify action and individuals associated with it. In this case, the Aztec poets have created a prestigious space for Huitzilopochtli's birth by linking the Toltec capital, source of the sanctity of kings and cultures, with Coatepec, the source of their own god, and then casting this linkage in the setting of "in illo tempore." At the center of this landscape, at the axis mundi, where the origin of Huitzilopochtli was revealed, the Mother of the Gods, Lady of the Serpent Skirt, is sweeping the temple. She is identified as the mother of "the four hundred gods of the south" especially one, Coyolxauhqui, by name.

The Miraculous Pregnancy of Coatlicue, the Mother Goddess

The narrative continues: "there fell on her some plumage."

Following the narration of the cosmological setting comes a short episode of the miraculous impregnation of the Mother Goddess by a small ball of "fine feathers" that fell from above (pl. 31). This variation on the theme of a conception by divine intervention raises the question regarding the Mesoamerican pattern of the creation of gods. In this case, the divine element descends from above, replicating what Lopez Austin calls the "process of the descent of divine semen into the earthly sphere to create new beings."³¹ It is again significant that the meeting point of heaven, in the form of the fine feathers, and the earth, in the form of the Mother Goddess, is the hill Coatepec.

The Four Hundred Children Prepare for War

The narrative continues: "they were very angry, they were very agitated, as if the heart had gone out of them. Coyolxauhqui incited them, she inflamed the anger of her brothers, so that they should kill her mother."

The third and longest episode in the myth details the ferocious preparation for war at the periphery of the Aztec empire and the march to Coatepec. The episode is one of dramatically shifting scenes between center and periphery, important dialogue between the unborn Huitzilopochtli and his mother and uncle, and a crescendo of motion leading to the ascent of the mountain. The entire action is laced with a ferocity of divine warriors cultivated by Coyolxauhqui. The episode reveals, among other things, the martial ideal par excellence of the Aztec warrior who builds himself up into

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a berserk mode of being through ritual array and communal incitement. It is also revealing that this berserk response to the pregnancy at the temple on the mountain begins at the periphery of the mythical geography and moves toward the center.³² This is especially important for the meaning of this geographic arrangement for the increment in human sacrifice that took place at the Templo Mayor.

The episode begins with the report that the 400 gods of the south were insulted by Coatlicue's pregnancy, and Coyolxauhqui exhorts them, "My brothers, she has dishonored us, we must kill our mother," and the inquiry of who fathered "what she carries in her womb." The scene abruptly shifts to the mountain, where Coatlicue becomes very frightened and sad of the threat by her children. Then, amazingly, Huitzilopochtli, still in her womb, calms her with the promise, "Do not be afraid, I know what I must do." The action then shifts back to the four hundred gods of the south who decide to kill their mother because of this disgrace. "They were very angry . . . very agitated . . . Coyolxauhqui incited them . . . she inflamed them." They respond to this mountain anger by attiring themselves "as for war." While they dress and groom themselves as warriors, one of the 400, named *Cuauhtlicac*, sneaked to Coatepec and reported every movement and advance toward the hill to Huitzilopochtli, who, still speaking from the womb, instructed his uncle, "Take care, be watchful, my uncle, for I know well what I must do." The text bears repeating at this point:

And when finally they came to an agreement, the four hundred gods determined to kill, to do away with their mother, then they began to prepare, Coyolxauhqui directing them. They were very robust, well equipped, adorned as for war, they distributed among themselves their paper garb, the *anecuyotl*, the nettles, the streamers of colored paper, they tied little bells on the calves of their legs, the bells called *oyohaulli*. Their arrows had barbed points. Then they began to move.

As they move, the informing uncle reports their advance to Huitzilopochtli, who listens carefully from the womb, "Now they are coming through Tzompantitlan . . . Coaxalpan . . . up the side of the mountain . . . now they are on the top, they are here," Coyolxauhqui is leading them.

Huitzilopochtli's Birth

The narrative continues: "Huitzilopochtli was born . . . he struck Coyolxauhqui, he cut off her head . . . Huitzilopochtli pursued the four hundred gods of the south, he drove them away, he humbled them, he destroyed them, he annihilated them."

The entire song has been building toward this dramatic devastation, not just of the sister Coyolxauhqui, but of the entire warrior population that attacks the mountain. When Coyolxauhqui arrives at the top of the mountain, Huitzilopochtli is born

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fully grown, swiftly dresses himself as a great warrior, and dismembers his sister with a serpent of fire. It is important to note that the text is specific not only about her head being cut off, but about her body falling to pieces as it rolled down the hill.

It is important to insert here the archaeological discovery of the great Coyolxauhqui stone in 1979. Electrical workers excavating a pit beneath the street behind the national Cathedral of Mexico City uncovered a massive oval stone more than three meters in diameter with the mint condition image of an Aztec goddess on it. The image consisted of a decapitated and dismembered female goddess whose blood was depicted as precious fluid. Her striated head cloth, stomach, dismembered arms, and legs were circled by serpents (see pl. 1). A skull served as her belt buckle. She had earth-monster faces on her knees, elbows, and ankles. Her sandals revealed a royal figure and the iconography shows that this figure was the goddess Coyolxauhqui.³³ Placed alongside the myth we are discussing, this stone is a vivid window to the Aztec sense of place because we know from Sahagún that the Templo Mayor was called *Coatepec* by the Aztecs and consisted of a huge pyramid supporting two temples—one to Huitzilopochtli and one to Tlaloc. Two grand and steep stairways led up to the shrines. What is truly remarkable is that the stone was found directly at the base of the stairway leading up to Huitzilopochtli's temple. On both sides of the stairway's base, completing the bottom of the stairway's sides, were two large grinning serpent heads (pl. 8). The image is clear. The Templo Mayor is the architectural image of Coatepec, or Serpent Mountain, and just as Huitzilopochtli triumphed at the top of the mountain, while his sister was dismembered and fell to pieces below, so Huitzilopochtli's temple and icon sat triumphantly at the top of the Templo Mayor with the carving of the dismembered goddess directly below (see pl. 3). As Broda and others have revealed, the Templo Mayor was also a replica of Mount Tlaloc, the exemplary space of the cult of the rain god.

In fact, most interpretations of this myth end with the dismemberment of Coyolxauhqui and the realization that the Templo Mayor and the architectural arrangement of Huitzilopochtli's temple and the Coyolxauhqui stone replicated this cosmogony; however, a further reading of the myth holds a major key to the significance of this mythic place.

Following Coyolxauhqui's dismemberment, there is a total reversal in the location of berserk, ferocious action—onto the person of Huitzilopochtli. Before, it was Coyolxauhqui who generated the ferocity of battle and transmitted it to her siblings. Now it is Huitzilopochtli who embodies enormous aggression and attacks. We are told again and again about his aggression, but most importantly that he attacks and sacrifices all the other deities in the drama. *It is a myth not just about one sacrifice but about a sudden increment in human sacrifices to include all warriors who come to the Templo Mayor—Coatepec.* Consider the text. Huitzilopochtli "was proud" and drove the 400 off the mountain of the snake, but he did not stop there. "He pursued them, he chased them like rabbits, all around the mountain . . . four times." Here we

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see reference to the symbolic number four representing directions, but also perhaps to the four previous cosmogonic ages. The text is emphatic regarding this ritual combat and the aggressions of the god: "with nothing could they defend themselves. Huitzilopochtli chased them, he drove them away, he humbled them, he destroyed them, he annihilated them." The text does not end there but continues to portray this ritual aggression in more vivid terms: "they begged him repeatedly, they said to him, 'It is enough.' But Huitzilopochtli was not satisfied, with force he pushed against them . . . and when Huitzilopochtli had killed them, when he had given vent to his wrath, he stripped off their gear [their ornaments]." The aggression of Coyolxauhqui and her 400 siblings dissolved before this one great warrior, who did more than defeat and kill them, he obliterated their existence. Finally, he takes their costumes, their symbols and "introduced them into his destiny, he made them his own insignia." In this act of symbolic possession, Huitzilopochtli transforms their obliteration into his own power, integrating the ritual array, the spiritual forces of their costumes into his own design. This is a remarkable act of paradigmatic value because, as the excavation has shown, so many objects from conquered and allied communities were literally integrated into the base of the Templo Mayor.

The Historical Epilogue

The narrative continues: "the Aztecs venerated him, they made sacrifices to him . . . and his cult came from there, from Coatepec, the Mount of the Serpent."

The myth ends with a direct reference to the paradigmatic role which this action played in Aztec religion. We are told that Huitzilopochtli was a "prodigy" who was conceived miraculously, "he never had any father," and that sacrifices were made to him in exchange for his rewards. In this final section, we are taken out of the mythic realm of the story into the historical purpose of the divine action—to practice the religion of Huitzilopochtli and his manner of birth. As at the beginning, we are solidly placed on the peak of Coatepec, which is identified as the origin of not only the god, but his cult.

The narrative ends: "and his cult came from there, from Coatepec, the Mountain of the Serpent, as it was practiced from most ancient times."

What we learn from this Aztec statement about myth, sacred space, and sacrifice is that *Coatepec was the mythic place where a god was born who sacrificed—not sacrificing just one god, but ferociously sacrificing an abundance of gods as his first act of life*. We are also instructed that this place and action was the source of a cult, a religious practice of many sacrifices, many ascents, and many ritual combats.

Reference to the practice of this cult appears in the reports of Diego Durán, whose informants told him that the events at Coatepec were performed every year in the national festivals of the Aztecs during the month of *Panquetzaliztli*. This ceremony was highlighted by a foot race called *Ipaina Huitzilopochtli* (the haste, velocity, or swift-

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ness of Huitzilopochtli). His comments reveal the relation of the myth just recounted and the theme and activity of the ceremony:

Thus was named this commemorative celebration because while the god was alive he was never caught, never taken prisoner in war, was always triumphant over his enemies, and, no matter how swift he goes none ever caught up with him. He was the one who caught them. Therefore this feast honored his speed.³⁴

It is as though the swiftness of pursuit and execution of the last episode of the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth becomes the model for this attitude in the ritual. The Templo Mayor and its parts and related actions located at the heart of the city and empire represent the dramatic cosmic victory of Huitzilopochtli and the Aztecs over celestial and terrestrial enemies.

Remembering the opening quotation of this chapter, we can now see that much more than just the butchering of Spaniards was taking place when they ascended the Great Temple, dressed in plumes, forced to dance in symbolic ecstasy, and sacrificed before being thrown down the steps of the temple. A ritual repetition was being carried out to reenact a mythic beginning, a ferocity, and a new conquest.

The Map of Cortés

We can see in this discussion of the Aztec ceremonial center the direct mythic influences on spatial orientation and the integration of kingship, sacrifice, and a number of elements of Aztec religion associated with the Templo Mayor. Order and orientation were prescribed by celestial beings and earthly hierophanies. We can also see opaque mythic influences on the ceremonial center in the recent interpretations by Anthony Aveni concerning the astronomical alignments of the Templo Mayor. Again, the symbolism of the center appears to be the fundamental organizing principle. Aveni and Sharon Gibbs have shown that a valuable clue to the Templo Mayor's location in time and space appears in the map of Tenochtitlán done by Cortés's cartographer during the conquests. The map shows the island city divided by four causeways emerging from the main ceremonial precinct which contained European-style palaces, ceremonial structures, a skull rack, and the Great Temple. Even though the two-towered pyramid is erroneously located on the west side of the ceremonial center, its actual location is indicated by a circular face drawn between the twin towers. As the sixteenth-century friar Motolinia discovered in his research on Aztec religion and the festival of the flaying of men, *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, "This festival takes place when the sun stood in the middle of uichilobos, which was at the equinox and because it was a little out of straight, Moctezuma wished to pull it down and set it right."³⁵ The facial image in the map is most likely the rising sun, which, according to Aveni and Gibbs, would have risen between the twin temples at seven degrees, six minutes south

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of east on the equinoctial date. This map, text, and astronomical alignment indicate a more profound alignment in Aztec society, that is, the alignment between the five key elements of the sacred king who lines himself up with the temple, the sun, the horizon, and the ritual of renewal. This coherence of authority, sacred space, star, ritual killing, and horizon is organized by the location, height, and prestige of the Templo Mayor. To understand the ritual significance of this social and symbolic alignment, we must note that the festival also combined the springtime festival of the god with the military initiation of young warriors. It was a great beginning of a fertility cycle and the life of warriors, signaled by the sun rising between the twin temples. Both Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli's powers were renewed by the dramatic correspondence of the temple, king, star, and human sacrifice.

THE NEW FIRE CEREMONY AND THE TEMPLO MAYOR

It is difficult to overestimate the paramount role of the Templo Mayor in the ceremonial and social life of the Aztec empire. Its status as the axis mundi of the Aztec world was expressed in the mythology of Huitzilopochtli and in the ritual activity of the scores of festivals dedicated to Aztec deities. Aztec kings, warriors, musicians, captives, the populace at large took their major point of orientation in geographic and symbolic space to be Coatepec. Although it has hardly been recognized before, even the spatial focus of the New Fire Ceremony, which took place once every fifty-two years, concentrates on the Templo Mayor. Consider the following discussion of this festival of cosmic renewal.

On an evening in the middle of November 1507, a procession of fire priests with a captive warrior "arranged in order and wearing the garb of the gods" advanced from the city of Tenochtitlán toward the ceremonial center on the Hill of the Star. During the days prior to this auspicious night, the populace of the Aztec world participated together in the ritual extinction of fires; the casting of statues and hearthstones into the water; and the clean sweeping of the houses, patios, and walkways. Book VII of the *Florentine Codex*, entitled *The Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and the Binding of the Years*, tells us that in anticipation of this fearful night, women were closed up in granaries to avoid their transformation into fierce beasts who would eat men, pregnant women donned masks of maguey leaves, and children were pinched and nudged awake to avoid being turned into mice while asleep. For on this one night in the calendar round of 18,980 nights the Aztec fire priests celebrated "when the night was divided in half," the New Fire Ceremony, which ensured the rebirth of the sun and the movement of the cosmos for another fifty-two years. This rebirth was achieved symbolically through the heart sacrifice of a brave warrior specifically chosen by the king. We are told that when the procession arrived "in the deep night" at the Hill of the Star, the populace climbed onto their roofs and "with unwavering attention and necks craned toward the hill became filled with dread that the sun would be destroyed

forever." It was thought that if fire could not be drawn, the demons of darkness would descend to eat men. As the ceremony proceeded, the priests watched the sky carefully for the movement of a star group known as *Tianquiztli* (marketplace), the cluster we call the *Pleiades*. As it made a meridian transit, signaling that the movement of the heavens had not ceased, a small fire was started on the outstretched chest of a warrior. The text reads, "When a little fire fell, then speedily the priests slashed open the breast with a flint knife, seized the heart, and thrust it into the fire. In the open chest a new fire was drawn and the people could see it from everywhere." The populace cut their ears, even the ears of children in cradles, the text tells us, "and spattered their blood in the ritual flicking of fingers in the direction of the fire on the mountain." Then the new fire was taken down the mountain, carried to the pyramid temple of Huitzilopochtli in the center of the city of Tenochtitlán, where it was placed in the fire holder of the statue of the god. Then messengers, runners, and fire priests who had come from everywhere took the fire back to the cities where the commonfolk, after blistering themselves with the fire, placed it in their homes, and "all were quieted in their hearts."³⁶

In reflecting on this famous passage about the New Fire Ceremony, I want to follow the lead of Giovanni Morelli and use an "a-centric" perspective. Morelli, a nineteenth-century art historian, developed a successful method for distinguishing original masterpieces from copies by focusing his eyes not on the most obvious characteristics of a painting in order to identify its master but "on minor details, especially those considered least significant in the style typical of the painter's own school."³⁷ Instead of looking at the smiles of Leonardo's women or the eyes of Perugino's characters, which were usually raised to heaven, Morelli studied the earlobes, the fingernails, and the shapes of fingers and toes. This method, the Morelli method, used minor details to gain a picture of the whole.

This passage, which contains only a few variants in sixteenth-century accounts, is extraordinarily thick and complex. It has the obvious meanings related to astronomy, calendars, ritual theatres, human sacrifice, and even child rearing. Coursing through it all is a thread, actually two threads, partly hidden, which not only tie the description together but also provide a clue to the underlying social and symbolic purpose of the ritual. These threads are the flow of Moctezuma's authority through all aspects of the ritual and the presence of the Templo Mayor as the axis mundi of the New Fire Ceremony.

The presence of these threads is more evident when we retrace *just* the physical actions of the description. The drama begins with Moctezuma in Tenochtitlan, even though in this account he is not mentioned at the beginning. Elsewhere in this volume, however, we are told that months before the New Fire Ceremony, Moctezuma ordered a captive be found whose name contained the word *xihuitl* (turquoise, grass, or comet)—a symbolic name connoting precious time. The procession of deity impersonators moves along a prescribed passageway, presumably seen and heard by masses

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of people before arriving at the Hill of the Star. In Motolinia we are told that Moctezuma "had special devotion and reverence for the shrine and the deity" on the Sacred Hill. Assembled in the ceremonial center, the group of priests and lords, sharing a heightened sense of expectation and fear, seek another procession—the procession of the stars through the meridian. Once recognized, the heart sacrifice is carried out, the new fire is lit amid universal rejoicing and bleeding, and the fire is taken to the Templo Mayor, presumably with Moctezuma on hand to see its blaze. Then in what I see as the most meaningful social and symbolic gesture, messengers, priests, and runners who have "come from all directions" to the Templo Mayor take the fire back to the towns and cities of the periphery. In Motolinia we are told that the fire was taken back to the temples only "after asking permission from the great chief of Mexico."³⁸

Focusing my eyes on the minor details of Moctezuma's role and the Templo Mayor as the shrine to which the New Fire is taken in order to be dispersed to the populace, I see a skillful symmetry reflecting the Aztec commitment to the interconnection of their world. By "symmetry" I mean the orderly arrangement of symbolic components around an axis. This symmetry consists of five elements: (1) the cosmic mountain (in this text there are two, the Hill of the Star and the Templo Mayor), (2) astronomical events, (3) human sacrifice, (4) agricultural renewal, and (5) sacred kingship. I see the center of this symmetry to be interplay between the king's flow of authority and the axis of Aztec society, the Templo Mayor. This interplay constitutes what the University of Chicago scholar of social thought Ed Shils calls a "center," by which he means "the point of points in a society where its leading ideas come together with its leading institution to create an arena in which events that most vitally affect its members lives take place."³⁹ What is taking place in the New Fire Ceremony is the integration of the leading idea—Moctezuma's authority—with the leading institution—the Templo Mayor—with the cosmic renewal integrated by an astronomical event.

FOUR QUARTERS AND THE CENTER

One of the most influential archetypes in Mesoamerican culture is reflected in the image of the horizontal cosmos, which appears in the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*. Here and elsewhere we see that the cosmos was conceived of as having five parts, with four quadrants called *nauhcampa* (the four parts) extending outward from the central section. Each quadrant was associated with specific names, colors, and influences. Although the pattern varied from culture to culture, a typical Mesoamerican version was as follows: east—Tlalocan (place of dawn)—yellow, fertile, and good; north—Mictlampa (region of the underworld)—red, barren, and bad; west—Cihuatlampa (region of women)—blue, green, unfavorable, and humid; south—Huitztlampa (region of thorns)—white; and center—Tlalxico (navel)—black. The waters surrounding the inhabited land in the middle were called *ilhuica atl* (the celestial water), which extended upward in a vertical direction merging with the sky and supported the lower level of heaven.⁴⁰

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This pattern of five cosmological spaces became the organizing principle for a multiple of supernatural, political, tributary, and economic concepts in central Mesoamerican society. For instance, the most popular and widespread deity in central Mesoamerica was Tlaloc, the fertilizing rain god. Tlaloc was often conceived of in quintuple forms called the *Tlaloques*, each assigned to one of the sacred directions. The pictorial image of these gods is almost a replica, in terms of design, of the pictorial image of the cosmic regions.⁴¹ The power of this spatial concept extended into Aztec images of cosmological time. For instance, one of the finest pieces of Mesoamerican religious sculpture is the Calendar Stone, more accurately called the *Piedra del Sol*, because it is a carved image of the cosmology depicting the five ages, or "suns," of the universe. In the center of the stone, the cosmic eras are divided into the pattern of a central space called the "Fifth Sun" surrounded by four previous eras, again duplicating the design of cosmic space. We have what Miguel León-Portilla calls the "spatialization of time."⁴² In this case, the spatial and temporal structure of the universe has been reduced to the carving on a single giant stone.

Tenochtitlán's prestige as the center of horizontal space is reflected in a number of ways. It is clear from the archaeological evidence and several maps of the city (e.g., see Matos, this volume, figs. 1 and 3) that it was divided into four sections (quadrants) by four major highways that crossed at the base of the Templo Mayor and drove straight out of the ceremonial precinct connecting the city with the mainland.⁴³ These avenues, carefully aligned to conform to major celestial events, determined the direction of the city's main streets and canals. What is equally important to note is that within this urban replica of cosmological space there were smaller microcosms. Each of the city's four quarters, as Edward Calnek has demonstrated, was a replica of the larger design in that each quarter had its own central temple complex housing the deities of the groups who inhabited that section.⁴⁴ A marketplace and administrative center were part of the central precinct of each quarter. Each quarter had its own sacred pivot, reproducing the pattern that dominated the city as a whole. Further, within each quarter the many barrios had their own local ceremonial precinct, repeating the symbolism of the center.

According to one primary source, this spatial order was dictated by the deity who founded the city, Huitzilopochtli. The text reads that the god ordered the priest to "divide the men, each with his relatives, friends and relations in four principal barrios, placing at the center the house you have built for my rest."⁴⁵ The divine command is to lay out the new settlement on the model of the horizontal cosmos of the four directions, assimilating the city to the form of the four quadrants that constituted the cosmos.

Recent research in the historical chronicles by Johanna Broda suggests that the Aztec practice of cardinal orientation went far beyond the ordering of urban space to include the ordering of parts of the tribute systems that sustained the entire population of Tenochtitlan. In her seminal article, "El tributo en trajes guerreros y la estructura del sistema tributarios mexica,"⁴⁶ Broda utilizes the abundant, although partial,

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evidence concerning tribute patterns of warriors' uniforms sent to Tenochtitlan to demonstrate that the Mexica organized their tribute system into five great regions corresponding to the five major directions (north, west, south, east, and center) in order to conform to their view of cosmic order. She speculates that the influence of cosmological thought extended into the palatial structure of Moctezuma, which, the *Codex Mendoza* reveals, was divided into five principal rooms. This codex also shows that the apex of Aztec government consisted of Moctezuma at the center of power with four counselors assisting his royal judgments. It appears, then, that the Aztec perception of their universe as a four-cornered universe significantly influenced not only the spatial structure of their city but also the order of their tribute system, the image of the royal palace, and the balance of their government. This process of miniaturization and duplication on the vertical level has been ably discussed by Rudolf van Zantwijk, who writes about Aztec cosmology and Aztec temple: "The principal subdivisions of an entity are repeated within the subdivision themselves. The universe is divided into sky, earth and underworld and each of these three shows a similar tripartite subdivision."⁴⁷

One great contribution toward understanding these mythical dimensions of the Templo Mayor comes from the 100 plus *ofrendas*, offering boxes full of valued objects, including seashells, masks, deity images, knives, human skeletons, necklaces, marine animals, and sculpture (see pls. 12–18), and other items. The significance of these treasures goes far beyond their being evidence of tributary offerings paid to the temple in the capital. When we explore what Matos calls the "language" of these offerings, we realize that the Templo Mayor was not just a place of valuable containers, it was the quintessential container itself, of tribute, cosmology, and myth. It was a monument of the integration of geographic, historical, and supernatural space and time.

Perhaps the most important example of this aspect of the Templo Mayor as center of the universe are the texts that tell how representatives from different cities and towns cast precious stones into the temple base on the occasion of the enlargements. This practice can be partly understood by reference to a similar act of founding told in Fustel de Coulanges's *The Ancient City*. On the occasion of the marking off of Rome's boundary by the circular trench cut by the plow, members of all the communities that were to be integrated into the city brought clods of earth from their homelands and cast them into the open trench. This signified the integration of the many "lands" and the deities of those lands into the new center.⁴⁸ Another significance in this act of ritual throwing is the relocation of the powers associated with many axes into a new axis of the world that contains the powers of many central places. It is a distinctive trait of the Mesoamerican world that a similar act of integration would be accomplished by the casting of precious earth in the forms of valuable stones from the peripheral communities. The Templo Mayor is the precious center into which were placed the many precious parts of land and sea.

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Matos's other point about these offerings deserves reiteration and development from the perspective of the history of religion. Consider again the location of the offerings boxes. They are placed at the cardinal points of the temple, in the middle of the four sides, at the corners and the point of union of the twin temples (see Matos, this volume, fig. 3). At every powerful cosmological point, offerings are buried that connect that terrestrial space to cosmological influences, marking the lines of parallelisms between heaven and earth. The rich sense of alignment we noted in the astronomical orientation of Templo Mayor is enlarged in the alignments of offering, architecture, and cosmology. In a sense, temple and offerings constitute a miniature map of the cosmic order. We have the replication of the symbolism of the center and cardinal axuality in a more detailed precise way than simply the reference to the four powerful directions of the universe.

IN COSMIC DARKNESS: THE BIRTH OF THE FIFTH SUN

This discussion of the influences of Aztec cosmology and cardinal axuality on the spatial organization of the capital, in relation to the Templo Mayor, enhances our understanding of the pervasiveness of mythic thought in Tenochtitlan. In retrospect, we have already learned that this pervasiveness was also specifically lodged in the action of human sacrifice, as revealed in the relationship between the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth and the sculptural image and location of the Coyolxauhqui stone, plus the evidence in text and archaeology of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor. We see that the question of the increment in human sacrifice is partially answered through the discovery within the myth that Huitzilopochtli kills not just one goddess, but that he annihilates all the deities—his sacrificial aggression extends to the killing of all the divine beings. This significant discovery appears to be Aztec specific; that is, the mythic structure of massive sacrifices seems to be particularly Aztec. As a historian of religions, sensitive to Mircea Eliade's emphasis on the overriding prestige of cosmogonic myth, however, I am encouraged to search out the texts further to see if any prior inkling or similar pattern appears in more ancient or more pervasive cosmogonic episodes in Mesoamerica. In fact, when we carry out this exercise in search of origins, we find that the cosmogonic imperative for incremental massive sacrifice has an even greater primordality of surprising proportions. Equally important, the movement of retrieval from the specific Aztec cosmogony of massive sacrifice to the more general and probably ancient Mesoamerican paradigm was a movement made by the Aztecs themselves. That is, the prologue that accompanies the text of Huitzilopochtli's birth in Sahagún's Book III tells us to move in the direction of prior cosmogony that unfolded in the ancient city of Tenochtitlan. Within this act of mythic retrieval, we discover not only the presence of a locative view of the cosmos, in which all things are in their place, but also the indications of an apocalyptic view of the universe in which order, place, and stability cannot be achieved.

MYTH, COSMIC TERROR, AND TEMPLO MAYOR

This movement and discovery is suggested in the short but rich prologue to the sacred song of Huitzilopochtli's birth commented upon earlier in this chapter. Prior to the statement of Aztec reverence for "the beginning" of Huitzilopochtli, we are told that the entire chapter of Book III of the *Florentine Codex* is concerned not with Huitzilopochtli's beginning but with "how the gods had their beginnings."⁴⁹ This statement about the creation of the gods is accompanied by the acknowledgment that "where the gods began is not well known." This ignorance of place, indicating either a non-Aztec or older tradition, is in sharp contrast to the specific place and proximity of Coatepec and Tula, which organized the mythic geography of Huitzilopochtli's birth. Then reference is made to the prestigious capital of Teotihuacán (abode of the gods), as the location of the primordial gathering of the gods in the cosmogonic darkness. What is immediately interesting about this is that, as in the myth of Huitzilopochtli, a gathering of gods takes place to bring forth "the sun," and this creation involves the destruction of all the gods. The text suggests the weight of this creative-destructive process was in the minds of the deities, for they "debated who would bear upon his back the burden of rule, who would be the sun." The scene is impressive in its cosmogonic opaqueness. In the darkness, the deities have gathered in the great ceremonial center to struggle together to create a new universe. Then the prologue to Huitzilopochtli's story ends with the remarkable statement that "all the gods died when the sun came into being. None remained who had not perished."⁵⁰

The discovery made in the Huitzilopochtli myth appears once more—the massive killing of gods brings about, or is part of, the cosmogonic act of creation—only in this episode, it is not just the birth of one god that matters, it is the passage from darkness, potentiality, and chaos into the brilliant light of the universe, actuality, and cosmological order that is accomplished. The larger universe within which Huitzilopochtli, Coyolxauhqui, the Centzonhuitzhahua, and the Fifth Age existed, is what is created in Teotihuacán.

This short prologue tells us that even in the Aztec mind, a *primordality* behind *Tenochtitlan's* *primordality* was the authentic stage of origin. Fortunately, we have a long and vivid account of this cosmogonic act in Book VII of the *Florentine Codex*. Turning to its details, we learn about the character and drama of this primordial condition. The more detailed version of the cosmogonic prologue to Huitzilopochtli's birth tells us that for fifty-two years following the end of the four ages, the world was in darkness. "When no sun had shown and no dawn had broken," the gods gathered at Teotihuacan to create a new age. They asked, "Who will carry the burden? Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?" Following four days of penance and ritual, all the gods gathered around a divine hearth where a fire had been burning for the duration. Two gods, *Nanauatzin* (the pimply one) and *Tecuciztecatl* (lord of snails), prepared to create the new sun by hurling themselves into the fire. After they dressed themselves for the ceremonial suicide, Tecuciztecatl approached the

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"Onward thou, O Nanauatzin! Take heart!" And Nanauatzin, daring all at once, determined-resolved-hardened his heart, and shut firmly his eyes. He had no fear; he did not stop short; he did not falter in fright. . . . All at once he quickly threw and cast himself into the fire; once and for all he went. Thereupon he burned; his body crackled and sizzled. . . . Tecuciztecatl . . . cast himself upon the fire. . . . It is told that then flew up an eagle, which followed them. It threw itself suddenly into the flames, it cast itself into them. . . . Therefore its feathers are scorched looking and blackened—smutted—in various places, and singed by the fire. . . . From this event it is said, they took . . . the custom whereby was called and named one who was valiant, a warrior.⁵¹

It is important that within this cosmogonic myth the story of the creation of warriors stands out as the primary act of creation. On one hand, Nanauatzin's daring, hard heart, and surrender to the fire is the paradigmatic attitude of the primal warrior; on the other hand, the first inklings of creation are the emergence of the eagle, who dives back into the fire, scorching himself, and the jaguar, which becomes marked and darkened by the divine fire. When we remember that the two great orders of warrior knights in Aztec society were the eagle and jaguar knights, it appears that the Aztecs drew directly from this tradition to legitimize the religious significance and power of their soldiers. The text continues:

Then the gods sat waiting to see where Nanauatzin would come to rise—he who fell first into the fire—in order that he might shine as the sun; in order that dawn might break. When the gods had sat and been waiting for a long time, thereupon began the reddening of the dawn; in all directions, all around, the dawn and light extended. And so, they say, thereupon the gods fell upon their knees in order to await where he who had become the sun would become to rise. In all directions they looked; everywhere they peered and kept turning about. Uncertain were those whom they asked. Some thought that it would be from the north that the sun would come to rise, and placed themselves to look there; some did so to the west; some placed themselves to look south. They expected that he might rise in all directions, because the light was everywhere. And some placed themselves so that they could watch there to the east.⁵²

This original confusion about the sun's place of emergence in the glowing dawn reveals the lack of clear orientation that existed in the cosmos prior to the appearance of the sun above the horizon. It is with the sun's clear appearance and passage that the universe becomes organized. The text continues:

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Thus they say that those who looked there to the east were Quetzalcoatl: the name of the second was Ecatl: and Totec . . . and the red Tezcatlipoca . . . And when the sun came to rise, when he burst forth, he appeared to be red; he kept swaying from side to side.⁵³

This is the cosmic condition facing men in the Fifth Age of the Aztecs. The sun is "swaying from side to side," unable to achieve stability, or find its place, or initiate a creative movement. Even at the mythic level, the level at which cosmological order was achieved, the sun has a profound difficulty finding its place and orienting the world.

This unstable and threatening situation demands still more exertion from the gods because the sun and moon "could only remain still and motionless." The gods then commit themselves to a course of action that will have a terrible paradigmatic influence on the Toltec and Aztec societies: they decide to sacrifice themselves to ensure the motion of the sun. "Let this be, that through us the sun may be revived. Let all of us die." Then *Ecatl* (the wind god), a guise of Quetzalcoatl, "arose and exerted himself fiercely and violently as he blew. At once he could move him, who thereupon went on his way."⁵⁴

It is remarkable that upon finding the cosmogonic background for Huitzilopochtli's story we arrive at the same discovery. Creation of the cosmos in Aztec and pre-Aztec Mesoamerica is directly tied to the sacrifice, not of one or a few deities, but to the increment in sacrifice that begins with one courageous warrior and spreads to annihilate all the gods who have gathered at the divine center of the world. The unstable cosmos that is created depends on massive ritual killing and an increment in divine death.

The cosmic pattern of massive sacrifices to energize the sun is repeated in a subsequent episode in which terrestrial warfare and human sacrifice is created by the gods to ensure their nourishment. In one version, the god Mixcoatl (cloud serpent) creates five human beings and 400 Chichimec warriors to stir up discord and warfare. When the masses of warriors pass their time hunting and drinking, the god sends the five individuals to slaughter them. In this account, war among human beings is created to ensure sacrificial victims for the gods.

CENTER AND PERIPHERY

Until now we have seen abundant evidence that the Aztec city was structured by a series of meanings and activities associated with what Mircea Eliade calls the "Symbolism of the Centre." It is becoming clearer to me that the usual way in which some historians of religions conceive of the category of the center does not constitute a thorough interpretive approach for understanding the Templo Mayor's history and meaning. A people's vision of place reflects the intertwining of symbol and society,

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ontology, and history. In this regard, it is vitally important, in the Aztec case at least, not just to be aware of the integrating powers of the axis mundi but also to acknowledge and interpret the impulses of expansion of a sacred center and the political and symbolic results. We have seen how this process of the expansion of Aztec's sacred space paralleled the development of Tenochtitlan from the spot of the nopal (cactus plant) to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli and spread to the four quadrants of the city and eventually the organization of tribute payments for the empire. But we have also seen evidence that distant, peripheral communities, that is, the centzon huitznahua (Coyolxauhqui's 400 brothers) played a major role in the symbolism of the Templo Mayor. This suggests that it is necessary to understand the historical, social, and symbolic tension that developed between the centripetal character of the capital and the centrifugal tendencies of the capital. For instance, Edward Shils has shown that great centers are ruled by elites whose authority has

an expansive tendency . . . a tendency to expand the order it represents towards the saturation of territorial space . . . the periphery. Rulers, simply out of their possession of authority and the impulses which it generates, wish to be obeyed and they wish to obtain assent to the order they symbolically embody.⁵⁵

These impulses of expansion will inevitably lead to involvement in peripheral and competing traditions of value, meaning, and authority. This sometimes results in tentative arrangements of power and authority between the center and the periphery. Peripheral systems and their symbols may be weaker within a hierarchy of an empire; nevertheless, they have the potential to threaten the center with disbelief, reversal, and rebellion. It is within this kind of situation that W. B. Yeats's famous line has direct relevance: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." Although I cannot discuss the Mesoamerican pattern in detail here, it appears that ancient Mexican kingdoms were sometimes arranged similarly to what Stanley Tambiah in his study of Southeast Asian kingdoms calls "pulsating galactic polities," that is, kingdoms in which the capital cities were in constant tension and antagonism with the surrounding allied and enemy settlements. In these pulsating kingdoms, the "exemplary centers" are frequently deflated by rebellion and disputes with unstable factions who threatened to bring about processes of disintegration on a large scale. This resulted in the periodic relocation of capital cities and an eccentric and unstable understanding of authority.⁵⁶ My own study of Mesoamerican urbanism has led me to the formulation of "eccentric periodicities," that is, periods of stability lasting for extended periods ending in dramatic and near-total collapses. Then, after a period of recovery, a new period of stability organized by a regional capital in a different location takes place only to give way to disintegration and rebellion. In my view, the pulsating pattern in Mesoamerica fluctuated at different times and places between a slow and ponderous rhythm, and a more rapid rhythm of fusion and fission.

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I consider this point important, because it suggests not only that centers dominate and control peripheries but also that peripheries influence and sometimes transform centers, even a center so aggressive and dominant as Tenochtitlan. I apply the category of periphery, in relation to center, in three ways: spatial, social, and symbolic. The Aztec periphery refers to distant spaces and geographies, to social order and prior civilizations, and to the masses of people whose religious sensibility and symbolism differed from the elite structures of power and authority. With this pattern in mind, we can reconsider the evidence uncovered at the Great Temple to see the impact of peripheral territories on the capital city. We will see that threats from the Aztec past and the competing traditions of their contemporary world transformed the Templo Mayor and the city it sanctified. As we shall see, this pattern of social organization, combined with the mythic structure of incremental human sacrifice, provides a rich interpretive framework for understanding the scandal of Templo Mayor.

Symbols from the Periphery

As noted previously, the Templo Mayor was the symbolic center of the great tribute network of the Aztec empire (see pls. 13–16). It was not only the material expression of Aztec religious thought but was also the symbolic instrument for the collection and redistribution of wealth and goods from all over the empire. The social world that the Aztecs strove to control consisted of small local states called *tlatocayotls*.⁵⁷ These city-states consisted of small, agriculturally based, politically organized territories under the control of a city that was the seat of government, ceremonial center, and home of a ruling class that claimed descent from the gods. Conflict and warfare were constant, and the conquest of one *tlatocayotl* by another resulted in the imposition of significant tribute on the conquered people. As the Aztec conquests proceeded to incorporate scores of these city-states into their empire, tribute payments to Tenochtitlan became enormous. The city's prestige and wealth depended to a large degree on these enormous amounts of tribute payments that flowed into the capital and ensured economic superiority for the royal house, the nobles, and the common citizen. Significantly, over 100 offerings of symbolic tribute have been uncovered at strategic points around the base of the pyramid, at every stage of its construction. These offerings contain seashells (see pls. 12, 13, 26, 27), finely carved masks (see pls. 44–47), statues of deities, sacrificed humans and animals (see pls. 35, 38, 21, 22), knives (see pl. 32), and jewelry. Professor Broda's intense analysis of these materials reveals, among other things, the "sacred landscapes" symbolized in the offerings dedicated to Tlaloc. From my perspective, the fertility-mountain-earth-mother complex she has illuminated reflects the Aztec conception of periphery—the lands, labors, and religious beliefs of the masses of people located beyond the city and, in many cases, beyond the core of the Aztec empire. Over 80 percent of these objects are from distant and frontier provinces under Aztec domination. Their presence in the heart of the city dis-

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plays the attempt to integrate valued and symbolic objects from the periphery of the Aztec state into the foundation of the central shrine as a means of sanctifying the conquests and the expansion of Aztec sacred social order. For instance, a number of offerings contain large and small shells (see pl. 13), usually oriented toward the south, which were brought from the distant seacoasts. They represent the powers of fertility associated with the great bodies of water. These powers are also represented in the crocodiles (see pl. 38) and swordfish buried at the temple. Another meaning of these burials relates to the fact that the Aztecs called the terrestrial world *Cemana-huac*, which means the land surrounded by water. In this light, the offerings of the shells and marine objects demonstrate the Aztec desire to incorporate the edges of their world into the sacred shrine and constitute a symbolism of center and periphery. The fertility symbols from the periphery were buried at the center.

This integration of peripheral places is elaborated in one of the most impressive discoveries to date, the offering of over fifty finely carved masks in one burial in front of Tlaloc's shrine (see pl. 16). These masks have noble, frightening, awe-inspiring faces that were carved in many different settlements under Aztec domination. They display different artistic styles (see pls. 42-44), emphasizing different facial features, and were apparently offered as special tribute to the Great Temple for some auspicious ceremonial event during the latter part of the fifteenth century. They are signs not only of offering but also of subjugation. Valuable objects, perhaps symbolic faces of different allies or frontier communities, were buried at the world's axis. There is one significant temporal aspect of this collection because the most remarkable mask is a small, mint-condition, Olmec jade mask that was probably carved a full 2,000 years before the first of the temple's eleven facades were constructed (see pl. 39). In this precious Olmec treasure and in a number of Teotihuacan-style masks, we see the Aztec concern with integration of the symbols of the ancient civilization in its shrine.

Twin Temples

When the Chichimec tribes, from whom the Aztecs emerged as conquerors, came into the central plateau during the thirteenth century, they encountered a world that had long been dominated by complex state societies.⁵⁸ It is important to understand that while the Aztecs did evolve from an insignificant political group into an imperial people in less than 200 years, the institutions that they developed had been in existence for over 1,500 years. Complex state societies with great capital cities dominating lesser cities and communities had been the order of life in central Mesoamerica since the beginning of the first millennium A.D.

The magnificent cities of Teotihuacan, Tollan, and Chollolan, with their great pyramids, imposing stone sculpture, complex social structures, long-distance trade systems, religious iconography, and sacred genealogies for kings, intimidated and inspired the Aztecs to measure up to and integrate the Classic heritage.⁵⁹ As noted, the truly

monumental four-section city of Teotihuacan (Abode of the Gods) was revered as the place where the present cosmogonic era was created.⁶⁰ Aztec kings periodically visited the ancient shrines to perform sacrifices and reestablish ties to the divine ancestors and sanctity that dwelt there. The prestige of Teotihuacan was reflected in the two "red temples" found at Templo Mayor containing Teotihuacan-style architecture and symbolism. The Toltec civilization of the Great Tollan and the cult of Quetzalcoatl were viewed as the "golden day" of artistic excellence, agricultural abundance, ritual renewal, and place where giants had perceived the divine plan for human society.⁶¹ One of the last discoveries at the Templo Mayor was the splendid "Eagle Temple," which contained not only the life-size eagle warriors (see pl. 53), statues of Mictlantecuhctli, and images of Tlaloc but also a long, winding, sculptured frieze of warriors replicating, in general terms, a similar frieze at Tula. As Esther Pasztory has shown, these cities "cast a giant shadow over the Aztecs who could not help feeling small and inferior by contrast."⁶² Plagued by a sense of illegitimacy and cultural inferiority, the Aztecs made shrewd and strenuous efforts to encapsulate the sanctified traditions of the past into their shrine. This is reflected in the fact that the Templo Mayor was a "twin temple," a form invented by the Aztecs and their contemporaries. The Templo Mayor supported great shrines to Tlaloc, as well as Huitzilopochtli. On the obvious level, Tlaloc's presence (see pls. 48–51) represents the great forces of water and moisture, which were absolutely critical for agricultural conditions of the lake and surrounding lands. Elaborate ceremonies were held, involving the sacrifice of children to Tlaloc, in order to bring the seasonal rains to the land.⁶³ Tlaloc's prominence at the shrine displays another Aztec concern as well. Tlaloc was the old god of the land who had sustained the great capitals of pre-Aztec Mexico. He represented a prior structure of reality in a cultural and supernatural sense. He had granted permission to the Aztecs to settle in the lake; therefore, he was the indigenous deity who adopted the newcomers. As a means of legitimating their shrine and city, the Aztecs were forced to integrate the great supernatural and cultural authority of the past into the Templo Mayor.

The practice of integrating the images of the great cultural past is also reflected in the discovery of an elaborately painted Chac Mool in front of one of the earliest Templo Mayor constructions (see pl. 52). This backward reclining figure, who was a messenger to the fertility gods, holds a bowl on his lap which was used to hold the heart of a sacrificial victim. Chac Mools were originally Toltec figures that had appeared in prominent ceremonial centers of the Toltec cities. The statue's surprising appearance at the Templo Mayor suggests again the Aztec insecurity and concern to bring the superior cultural past into their mighty present.

Human Sacrifice and the Historical Periphery

As is well documented in the ethnohistorical and archaeological sources, the Templo Mayor was the scene of elaborate human sacrifices, which increased to incredible

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numbers during the last eighty years of Aztec rule (see pl. 1).⁶⁴ The usual justification for this increment has been the belief that the Aztecs were feeding their gods in order to keep the cosmos in motion. Before looking more closely at this scandalous development, let us consider a short survey of the practice and paraphernalia of human sacrifice, to demonstrate the basic pattern of ritual violence.

It must be understood that human sacrifice was carried out within a larger, more complex ceremonial system in which a tremendous amount of energy, wealth, and time was spent in a variety of ritual festivals dedicated to a crowded and hungry pantheon.⁶⁵ This dedication is reflected in the many metaphors and symbols related to war and sacrifice. Blood was called *chalchiuh-atl* (precious water). Human hearts were likened to fine burnished turquoise, and war was *teoatl tlachinolli* (divine liquid and burned things). War was the place "where the jaguars roar," where "feathered war bonnets heave about like foam in the waves." Death on the battlefield was called *xochimiquiztli* (the flowery death).

The many ritual festivals were organized by two calendars, a divinatory calendar of 260 days and a solar calendar of 360 days with 5 "dangerous days" at the end. The divinatory calendar appears to have organized the birthday festivals of the patron deities of the neighborhoods and local communities. The solar calendar marked the major festivals for the prominent deities of war, sun, rain, and fertility. Some festivals included rituals dedicated to both local and major gods and dramatized the relationships between them.

This crowded ceremonial schedule was acted out in the many ceremonial centers of the city and empire. The greatest ceremonial precinct formed the axis of Tenochtitlan and measured 440 meters on each of its four sides. It contained, according to some accounts, over eighty ritual temples, skull racks (see pl. 10), schools, and other ceremonial structures. Book II of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* contains a valuable list with descriptions of most of these buildings, including "the Temple of Uitzilopochtli . . . of Tlaloc . . . in the middle of the square, . . . it was higher, it was taller . . . faced toward the setting of the sun." Also we read of the "Teccizcalli: there Moctezuma did penances; . . . there was dying there; captives died there" and "Mexico Calmecac: there dwelt the penitents who offered incense at the summit of the Temple of Tlaloc, quite daily," and "Teccalco: there was casting (of men) into the fire there," and "The Great Skull Rack: there also there used to be slaying," followed by "The Temple of Cinteotl: there the impersonator of Chicome coatl died, at night only. And when she died, then they flayed her . . . the fire priest put on her skin" and "Coaapan; there the fire priest of Coatlan bathed himself" and for cooking "Tilocan; there cooked the (amaranth seed dough for) the image of Uitzilopochtli" and finally for cannibalistic preparation, "Actl Yiacapan Uey Calpulli; . . . there they gathered together the sacrificial victims called Tlalocs . . . when they had slain them, they cut them to pieces there and cooked them. They put squash blossoms with their flesh . . . then the noblemen ate them, all the high judges: but not the common fold—only the rulers."

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Important variations of ritual activity were carried out at these temples, schools, skull racks, and bathhouses; however, the general pattern of human sacrifice was as follows. Most Aztec rituals began with a four-day (or multiples of four) preparatory period of priestly fasting (*nezahualiztli*). An important exception was the year-long fast by a group of priests and priestesses known as the *teocuaque* (god eaters) or the greatly feared *in iachhuan Huitzilopochtli in mocexiuhzauhque* (the elder brothers of Huitzilopochtli who fasted for a year). This preparatory period also involved nocturnal vigil (*tozohualiztli*) and offerings of flowers, food, cloths, rubber, paper, poles with streamers, as well as incensing (*copaltemaliztli*); the pouring of libations; and the embowering of temples, statues, and ritual participants. Dramatic processions of elaborately costumed participants moving to music ensembles playing sacred songs passed through the ceremonial precinct before arriving at the specific temple of sacrifice. The major ritual participants were called *in ixiptla in teteo* (deity impersonators). All important rituals involved a death sacrifice of either animals or human beings.

The most common sacrifice was the decapitation of animals such as quail, but the most dramatic and valued sacrifices were the human sacrifices of captured warriors and slaves. These victims were ritually bathed, carefully costumed, taught to dance special dances, and either fattened or slimmed down during the preparation period. They were elaborately dressed to impersonate specific deities to whom they were sacrificed.

The different primary sources reveal a wide range of sacrificial techniques, including decapitation (usually for women) (see pl. 1), shooting with darts or arrows, drowning, burning, hurling from heights, strangulation, entombment and starvation, and gladiatorial combat. Usually, the ceremony peaked when splendidly attired captors and captives sang and danced in procession to the temple, where they were escorted (sometimes unwillingly) up the stairways to the sacrificial stone. The victim was quickly thrust on the sacrificial stone (*techcatl*) and the temple priest cut through the chest wall with the ritual flint knife (see pl. 32) (*tecpatl*). The priest grasped the still beating heart, called "precious eagle cactus fruit," tore it from the chest, offered it to the sun for vitality and nourishment, and placed it in a carved circular vessel called the *cuauhxicalli* (eagle vessel). In many cases, the body, now called "eagle man," was rolled, flailing, down the temple steps to the bottom where it was dismembered. The skull was decapitated, the brains taken out (see pl. 22), and after skinning, it was placed on the *tzompantli* (skull rack) consisting of long poles horizontally laid and loaded with skulls. In many cases, the captor was decorated, for instance, with chalk and bird down, and given gifts. Then, together with his relatives, he celebrated a ritual meal consisting of "a bowl of stew of dried maize called *tlacatlaolli* . . . on each went a piece of the flesh of the captive."

While this pattern of ritual preparation, ascent and descent of the temple, heart sacrifice of enemy warriors, dismemberment and flaying of the victim, and cannibalism was usually followed, it is important to emphasize the diversity of sacrificial festivals that involved variations and combinations of these elements. For instance,

during the feast of Tlacaxipehualiztli, "the feast of the flaying of men," a prisoner of war "who came here from lands about us" was taken by a priest called the "Bear Man" and tied up to a huge round sacrificial stone (*temalacatl*) placed horizontally on the ground. The captive was provided with a pine club and a feathered staff to protect himself against the attacks of four warriors armed with clubs of wood and obsidian blades. When he was defeated he was removed from the stone and short temple base, his heart was taken out, and he was flayed.

Another distinctive festival was called *Toxcatl*, dedicated to the ferocious god *Tezcatlipoca* (Smoking Mirror). Elaborate efforts were made to find the perfect deity impersonator for this festival. The captive warrior had to have a flawless body, musical talents, and rhetorical skills. For a year prior to his sacrifice he lived a privileged existence in the capital. He had eight servants, who ensured that he was splendidly arrayed and bejeweled. He had four wives given to him during the last twenty days of his life. Just before the end of the sacrificial festival we are told that he arrived at a "small temple called Tlacochalco . . . he ascended by himself, he went up of his own free will, to where he was to die. As he was taken up a step, as he passed one step, there he broke, he shattered his flute, his whistle" and was then swiftly sacrificed.

A very remarkable festival, celebrated on the first day of the month of *Atlcahualo*, involved the paying of debts to Tlaloc, the rain god. On this day, children (called "human paper streamers") with two cowlicks in their hair and favorable day signs were dressed in such colors as dark green, black striped with chili red, light blue, some set with pearls, and were sacrificed in seven different locations (see pl. 15). The flowing and falling of tears of the children ensured rain.

Besides these theatrical ritual killings, everyone in the Aztec world participated in some form of self-sacrifice or bloodletting. Bloodletting was either an offering or penitential rite involving the pricking of earlobes with maguey thorns or, in more severe circumstances, the drawing of strings through holes cut in the tongues, ears, genitals, and other fleshy parts of the body. Often blood was placed on slips of paper and offered to the gods.⁶⁶

The claim that this ceremonial system was developed to feed the gods may be partly true; however, my interpretation of the two cosmogonic episodes reveals that human sacrifice and incremental human sacrifice was an act of cosmic repetition that functioned not only as a feeding ritual but also as a ritual re-creating Aztec dominance and power established in their sacred history. The Aztecs were reestablishing a mythic structure that revealed that military aggression against the forces from the periphery created a new world—the world of Huitzilopochtli or the cult of the Fifth Sun. A conference held at the University of Colorado in 1979, "Center and Periphery: the Aztec, the Templo Mayor, and the Aztec Empire," showed it was a combination of myth and history that led to the increments of ritual killing at the Templo Mayor. Papers and discussions at this conference focused on the powers of peripheral city-states and the abundant number of objects that originated from the distant tributary towns in the empire. As Johanna Broda in particular pointed out, this near obsession with the

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periphery had a peculiar social significance. We know that within the Valley of Mexico the Aztec warrior and priestly nobility managed a high degree of centralization of agricultural schedules, technological developments, labor management, and ritual processes. In all directions beyond the valley, however, there was little continued success in peacefully controlling the internal organization of conquered or enemy city-states.⁶⁷ The Aztec capital, while expanding its territory and tribute controls, was repeatedly shocked by rebellions that demanded complex and organized military and economic reprisals. My own survey of the opening chapters of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's eyewitness account of the Aztec empire shows the tenuous and emotionally charged relationship between the capital city and the coastal settlements. From the earliest stages of the military campaigns in Mexico, Cortés discovered that a combination of allegiance, fear, and resentment on one hand and outright defiance on the other hand motivated caciques and populations located in the peripheral areas of the Aztec empire. In fact, it was partly Cortés's ability to perceive the weaknesses in the extension of Aztec authority to the eastern flanks of the empire that led to the eventual conquest of Tenochtitlan. This antagonism between the core area and the surrounding city-states created immense stresses within all the institutions of Tenochtitlan, contributing to the astonishing increases in human sacrifice carried out at the Templo Mayor between 1440 and 1521. Not only did the political order appear unstable but the divine right to conquer and subdue all peoples and enemies also seemed unfulfilled. The anxiety that the Aztecs already experienced in regard to their universal order, after all cosmic life as an unending war, was intensified to the point of cosmic paranoia. In this situation, the ritual strategy to rejuvenate the cosmos became the major political instrument to subdue the enemy and control the periphery.

Broda has shown that the role of the Templo Mayor in this explosive process can be seen in at least three important events. During the reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (1440 to 1455), the shrine of Huitzilopochtli received its first large reconstruction (see pls. 2, 4).⁶⁸ As a means of ensuring quality of workmanship and allegiance to the new temple, workers from a number of city-states under Aztec control were ordered to do the job. One independent community, Chalco, refused to participate and was declared in rebellion against the Aztecs, however. A ferocious war was launched, and eventually the Chalcans were defeated. Their captured warriors were brought to the Templo Mayor and, along with other prisoners of war, sacrificed at its rededication. This pattern of celebration—the expansion of the Great Temple with warfare and the sacrifice of enemy warriors—was followed by subsequent Aztec kings who increased the sacrificial festivals as a means of controlling resistance and peripheral territories. In 1487 Ahuitzotl celebrated the renovation of the Templo Mayor by ordering great quantities of tribute brought into Tenochtitlan. Newly conquered city-states were ordered to send their tribute in the form of sacrificial victims who were slain at the inauguration.

Curiously, at these ceremonies of massive human sacrifice, the kings and lords from allied and enemy city-states were invited to the ceremonial center to witness the

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spectacular festival. The ritual extravaganza was carried out with maximum theatrical tension, paraphernalia, and terror in order to amaze and intimidate the visiting dignitaries, who returned to their kingdoms trembling with fear and convinced that cooperation, and not rebellion, was the best response to Aztec imperialism.

On another occasion, the Aztec king, this time Moctezuma Xocoyotzin (1503 to 1520), ordered the construction of a temple within the main ceremonial precinct to house the images of all the gods worshipped in the imperial domain. Before the dedication of the shrine, he ordered a war against a rebellious coastal city-state, Teuctepec. From this campaign, 2,300 warriors were brought to Tenochtitlan and sacrificed while the king initiated the sacrifices.

All this suggests that the tension between the capital and peripheral towns and the political threats and cosmic insecurities that Aztec elites experienced as a result contributed in a major way to the increase of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor.

The significant changes in Aztec religion between 1440 and 1521, manifested primarily in the increment of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor, require further discussion here. One fact the excavation and ethnohistorical analysis proves is that pervasive changes were taking place throughout Aztec society during the period of the rapid expansion and rebuilding of the Templo Mayor. Friedrich Katz, in his excellent general history of the Aztec state, reveals how the royal counselor Tlacaelel set in motion a number of innovations to ensure Aztec dominance in the face of the intense rebellions and threatening agricultural crises that periodically plagued the capital. This flexibility and increment in the religious rituals of the Aztecs can be partly understood with reference to Roy Rappaport's work on the capacity of the sacred to assist a society in adapting to new social circumstances without weakening the cherished cultural conceptions of a people. We have long known, says Rappaport, that sanctity supports and conserves the social order. Traditionally, scholars have viewed adaptations and innovations as signs of secular advances and the break with conventional theologies and ideologies. Rappaport, however, uses Hockett and Ascher's formulation of "Romer's rule" to argue a different approach. This formulation "proposes that the initial effect of an evolutionary change is conservative in that it makes it possible for a previously existing way of life to persist in the face of changed conditions." Rappaport argues that the sacred can actually enhance the flexibility in social structure and symbolic organization to persist in the face of innovation and change. In other words, the threatening aspects of changed conditions can be somewhat neutralized by incorporation into sacred tradition. This ability to combine flexibility and rigidity derives from the fact that some elements of the sacred are not restricted in their meaning to specific social goals or institutions. Rappaport states:

They can, therefore, not only sanctify any institution while being bound by none but can also sanctify changes in institutions. Continuity can be maintained while allowing change to take place, for the association of particular institutions or conventions with ultimate sacred postulates is a matter of

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interpretation, and that which must be interpreted can also be reinterpreted without being challenged. So, gods may remain unchanged while the conventions they sanctify are transformed through reinterpretation in response to changing conditions.⁶⁹

Rappaport shows that sacred concepts communicate much more than information about temple activity. They convey information about the political arrangements and the regulation of society, and they imbue these arrangements with an aura of the sacred. Sanctity is infused in all systems and subsystems of society in order to maintain the fundamental order of social life. Sanctity allows the persistence of traditional forms in the face of "structural threats and environmental fluctuations."

From this perspective, the time-honored tradition (human sacrifice) underwent a significant innovation (large-scale human sacrifice in relation to conquered warriors) in order to maintain Aztec dominance in the face of threats (rebellions) and fluctuations (droughts). The increment in human sacrifice is an example of Romer's rule, and not the expression of protein deficiency or merely a response to environmental pressures. It was a religious strategy carried out to conserve the entire cosmogonic structure of the Aztec city-state.

There is a remarkable parallelism between these events and the mythic structure of Huitzilopochtli's myth, where enemy warriors from distant and rebellious communities were slain with unceasing aggression at the sacred mountain. One important difference is that, within the myth, these killings intensified the power of the temple on the mountain and served as the origin of Huitzilopochtli's cult. In history, the increment of ritual killing served to both strengthen *and* weaken the authority of Tenochtitlan. Many city-states were securely integrated by terror into the Aztec sphere; however, some were alienated into the direction of other kingdoms and the capacity of rebellion increased. Nowhere is this pattern of social fission more clear than in the alliance-building process that Cortés directed as he traveled through the outskirts of the empire and met both vicious resistance and vital support from communities both loyal and disloyal to Moctezuma's capital. All the more reason, then, for the Aztecs to sacrifice those Spanish warriors at the Templo Mayor during their "rebellion" against the capital. In the eyes of the eagle and jaguar knights, the Spaniards were the threatening personification of the 400 children who had come to destroy the temple.

Myth and the Conquest

One final example of the alignment of mythic thought, sacred space, kingship, and ritual action in Aztec religion appears in several indigenous accounts of the conquest of Tenochtitlan. In these accounts we see the vivid expression of what I have called the "apocalyptic view" of the world in which the sacred order dissolves when cosmic things lose their place.

The opening section of the last volume of Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, a volume entitled *The Conquest*, tells that omens of great portent appeared in

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the valley of Mexico a full decade before Cortés and his soldiers arrived. Like so many historical events in the Aztec world, these strange happenings were viewed as cosmological messages about the destiny of the fifth sun. The first chapter of Book XII begins with the sentence, "Here are told the signs which appeared and were seen when the Spaniards had not yet come here to this land, when they were not yet known to the natives here." It is important that the text is emphatic about the fact that omens appear in relation to, but before the invasion of, the Spaniards in Mexico. In fact, in the three different accounts of these omens this priority of the celestial signs over the actions of the Spaniards in relation to the conquest is emphasized. The Indians' informants appear to be demonstrating that from their perspective, supernatural forces communicated that the connection between the cosmos and the state was disintegrating long before the Spaniards appeared to complete the process. In Sahagún, the omens appear as a message of destruction, reversal, and the end of the capital. The first omen, in a sense, tells it all. "A fiery signal . . . it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop like a wound in the sky." The Aztecs witness a "rip" in their universe, a rip that bleeds fire, threatening the death of their cosmos that is centered by the Templo Mayor. Then a catastrophe at the Great Temple takes place. The text reads, "The Temple of Huitzilopochtli burst into flames. It is thought that no one set it afire, that it burned down of its own accord. . . . The flames swiftly destroyed all the temple . . . and the temple burned to the ground." The center of the Aztec world is mysteriously ignited and destroyed. The identification of temple and city is strong in Mesoamerican thought, as demonstrated in illustrated books such as the *Codex Mendoza*, where the image of a temple tipped, and burning or smoking is a sign that the city has been conquered. In this frightening event, the shrine of the sun and war was burned and toppled, reflecting the image just discussed—a burning, falling temple signifies that a city has been conquered. A series of shocking omens follow in which the "Temple of Xiuhtecuhtli (the Old God, the Fire God) was struck by a lightning bolt," a comet raced across the sky from west to east—the reverse direction of the solar motion, the lake flooded the city, a weeping woman haunted the city at night, a bird with a mirror on its head reflected marching soldiers coming to the capital, and a two-headed man appeared on the streets of the city. The interplay of omens and political events continues to be displayed in the accounts of the subsequent battles and fall of the city. The informants have also described Moctezuma's suffering, the battles between the two armies, and are telling of the siege of Tenochtitlan. Then comes a passage full of piercing fate. We read that, just before the surrender of the city:

at nightfall it began to rain, but it was more like a heavy dew than a rain. Suddenly the omen appeared, blazing like a great bonfire in the sky. It wheeled in enormous spirals like a whirlwind and gave off a shower of sparks and red-hot coals, some great and some little. It also made loud noises, rumbling and hissing like a metal tube placed over a fire. It circled the wall nearest the lakeshore and then hovered for a while above Coyoncazco. From there it moved out in the middle of the lake where it suddenly

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disappeared. No one cried out when the omen came into view; the people knew what it meant and they watched in silence.⁷⁰

What they knew was that their mythic structure, their cosmological connection was dissolving into disorder, chaos, and the destruction of the temple. The precise ordering of costume, sculpture, cardinal axiality, and central place was breaking up and going haywire in one way or another.

These omens and their strategic location in the narrative about the conquest shows the tenacity of the interplay of cosmology, nature, sacred space, and cosmic collapse. It is very remarkable that thirty years after the conquest, in a society ruled by Spaniards, Aztec survivors poignantly reaffirm the mythic conviction lodged in their minds that the life and death of their city was animated not solely by Aztecs or Spaniards but also by the patterns of their own heavens.

Notes

1. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1956), p. 191.
2. The vital human need for "orientatio" has been elaborately described in a number of works by Mircea Eliade, including *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), *Patterns in Comparative Religions* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), and recently in his three-volume *The History of Religious Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), especially vol. I, p. 3.
3. Besides Johanna Broda's article, "Templo Mayor as Ritual Space," see Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, A. J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1951-1959), especially Book III, pp. 47-48, 52-53, and Book IX, pp. 66-67. See also numerous passages in Diego Durán's *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971). For a general view of ritual killing in Mesoamerica, see Elizabeth H. Boone, ed., *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, 1984).
4. See Miguel León-Portilla's study of Nahuatl philosophy, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Americas: The Mexican, Maya and Andean Peoples* (Baltimore: Pelican History of Art, 3d ed., 1984); and most recently, Esther Pasztory's truly remarkable *Aztec Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983). Pasztory's work is the first comprehensive attempt at defining and integrating the awesome and puzzling art of the Aztecs. Also, Richard Fraser Townsend's *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlán* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1979) describes the "living structural affinity between natural and the social orders" of the Aztec world in a fresh and penetrating way. Also note David Carrasco, "Aztec Religion," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, Editor-in-Chief, vol. 2, 23-29 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987).
5. See Alfonso Caso's authoritative introduction to the Mesoamerican Calendar in "Calendrical Systems in Central Mexico" in G. F. Eckholm and Ignacio Bernal, eds., *Handbook of*

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Middle American Indians (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), vol. 10, pp. 332–348 (hereafter referred to as *Handbook*).

6. H. B. Nicholson, "Major Sculpture in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," *Handbook* (1971): 10:92–134.

7. Pedro Armillas, *Program of the History of the American Indian* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1958); Philip Phillips and Gordon Willey, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Paul Kirchhoff, "Mesoamerica: Its Geographic Limits, Ethnic Composition and Cultural Characteristics," in *The Heritage of Conquest*, Sol Tax, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 17–30; and Pedro Carrasco, "The Peoples of Central Mexico and Their Historical Traditions," in *Handbook* (1971): 11:459–474.

8. Edward Calnek, "Tenochtitlán in the Early Colonial Period," *Actes du XLII Congres International des Americanistes*, Congres du Centenaire, Paris, 2–9 September 1976, vol. VIII, pp. 35–40, 1979.

9. Paul Wheatley, "City as Symbol," Inaugural lecture delivered at the University College, London, 20 November 1967, p. 7.

10. This phrase, "mythic structure," has been used convincingly by Jacob Neusner in his introductory study of Judaism, *The Way of Torah* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1976). Specific applications of this idea appear usefully in Cornelious Loew's *Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), Henri Frankfort's *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), and Charles H. Long's *Alpha: Myths of Creation* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1963), as well as David Carrasco's *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For a discussion of the ways in which a mythic structure gains power in novel situations see David Carrasco, "Quetzalcoatl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion," *History of Religions* 19 (May 1980): 296–319.

11. Among Jonathan Z. Smith's exciting works, see *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978) and the article from which this quote was taken, "The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change: A Place upon Which to Stand," *Worship* (October 1970): 14:457–474.

12. See Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959) and *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

13. This chapter, "Cosmogonic Myth and Sacred History," in *The Quest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 72–88, constitutes the most succinct statement of Eliade's view of the range of mythic influences in ritual life and human consciousness.

14. Loew, *Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy*: 5.

15. See Paul Wheatley's "The Suspended Pelt: Reflections on a Discarded Model of Spatial Structure" in *Geographic Humanism, Analysis and Social Action*, Donald R. Deskin, Jr., George Kish, John D. Nystuen, and Gunnar Olsson, eds. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1976), Geographic Publications, no. 17, pp. 47–108.

16. See Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*: 100–103 for a discussion of the significance of this term in relation to Eliade's terminology.

17. Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971).

18. Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 8.

19. Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1971). Besides this swollen seed of urban studies, Wheatley's expansive vision of the history and meaning of the city can be explored in his most recent work, *Nagara and Commandery: Origins of*

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the Southeast Asian Urban Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Geography Research Papers nos. 207-208, 1983).

20. Wheatley, *Pivot*: 414.
21. Townsend, *State and Cosmos*: 17-22.
22. Alfonso Caso, *El Pueblo del Sol* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economia, 1975).
23. See Henry B. Nicholson's remarkable summary article, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Handbook* (1971): 10:395-445 for a concise description of Mesoamerican cosmology.
24. Miguel León-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 87.
25. See León-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture* for an elaborate discussion of this Aztec High God, especially chapters 2 and 3.
26. Diego Durán, *Historia de Las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de Tierra Firme* (Mexico: Imprenta de J. M. Andrade y F. Escalante, 1867-1880), vol. 2, p. 343.
27. Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana* (Mexico: Editorial Leyenda, S.A., 1944).
28. See David Carrasco, "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza," *History of Religion* (20 February 1981): 199-220, for discussion in the footnotes regarding the symbolism. See also Carrasco's "Templo Mayor: The Aztec Vision of Place," *Religion* (London) 11 (1981): 275-297.
29. A recent publication, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, Miguel León-Portilla (Paulist Press, 1980), contains a large number of *teocuicatl*s (divine songs) and *huehuetlatollis* (ancient words), making the volume the best collection of indigenous fragments available in English. The following quotes regarding Huitzilopochtli are taken from pp. 220-225.
30. For an interpretation of Tula's religious significance see David Carrasco's *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, especially pp. 72-92 and 104-128, plus the bibliography.
31. Alfredo López-Austín's *Hombre-Dios: Religión y Política en el Mundo Nahuatl* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1973) is a complex and brilliant interpretation of Mesoamerican religion.
32. See Mircea Eliade's discussion of "magical heat" and "berserker" experiences in the history of religions for useful connections to not only the myth of Huitzilopochtli but also the warrior mentality, which animated segments of Aztec religion, in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 81-107.
33. See Henry B. Nicholson's detailed description of the Coyolxauhqui stone in "The New Tenochtitlán Templo Mayor Coyolxauhqui-Chantico Monument" (in press), in *Festschrift* honoring Professor Gerdt Kutscher, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, Berlin, Germany.
34. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites*: 458.
35. See Anthony Aveni's wealth of publications on the patterns of archaeoastronomy in Mesoamerican and native American traditions, including his *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).
36. Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, II: 25-30.
37. See Carlos Ginzberg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and the Scientific Method," in *The Sign of Three, Dupin, Holmes, Pierce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
38. See Johanna Broda's exhaustive account in "La Fiesta Azteca del Fuego Nuevo y el culto de la Pléyades," In *Space and Time in the Cosmovision of Mesoamerica*. Franz Tichy ed. *Latinamerika-Studien*, vol. 10 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink-Verlag, 1982b), pp. 129-158.
39. This quote is actually Clifford Geertz's gloss on Shils's work in "Centers, Kings and Charisma: Symbolics of Power," in *Local Knowledge*: 122. For a more extensive discussion of

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40. See H.
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40. See H. B. Nicholson's "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico" for a precise description of Aztec cosmology, in *Handbook* (1971): 10:395-446.

41. One of the most vivid examples of this replication and miniaturization can be found in the *Codex Borgia's* representations of the rain gods.

42. See Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

43. Edward Calnek, "The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlan," in *The Valley of Mexico*, Eric Wolf, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).

44. *Ibid.*

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47. Rudolph Van Zantwijk, "The Great Temple of Tenochtitlán: Model of Aztec Cosmology," in *Mesoamerican Sites and World Views*, Elizabeth P. Benson, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), pp. 71-84.

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65. Broda, "Ideology of the Aztec State," pp. 24-38. See also David Carrasco, "Human Sacrifice: Aztec Rites," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 6: 518-523 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987).

66. This general discussion of ritual human sacrifice is derived from H. B. Nicholson's

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"Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico" in *Handbook* (1971), 10: and the *Florentine Codex*, Book II, *The Ceremonies*. See especially the appendix.

67. Broda, "Ideology of the Aztec State," pp. 30-31.

68. Ibid.

69. Roy Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Richmond, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1979), p. 148.

70. This entire sequence of references comes from Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XII:3-10. Book XII contains the closest thing we have to an Aztec and Tlatelolca account of the conquest. For a collection of omen accounts associated with the Aztecs, see Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 3-15.

Nahuatl was
Vowels follow

Consonants c

LIST OF MO

Acamapichtli-
ah-ilix—"guan
stone ido
Ahuitzotl—eig
aj choch—"pr
referring
aj ixim—"pro
name refe
aj su'ts—"bein
name refe
alaxic—"linea